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Review of Rey Chow, ed., Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field.

Jason McGrath
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

Rey Chow, ed., Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field.
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Reviewed by Jason McGrath
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

At the turn of the twenty-first century, modern Chinese literature made a rare incursion into Western cultural consciousness when novelist and playwright Gao Xingjian won the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature. As a result, his modernist, semi-autobiographical novel, *Soul Mountain*, is one of the few works of literature translated from Chinese of which many educated Westerners are aware. The Nobel signified a recognition of the achievements of modern Chinese literature that had long been craved by Chinese writers, critics, and scholars, who had speculated for decades about when a Nobel prize would finally go to a Chinese author. The irony, however, was that Gao Xingjian himself had long since disappeared from the Chinese radar screen; in fact, if a hundred leading literary figures in China had been polled a week before the Nobel announcement and each had been asked to name the top authors of the post-Mao period, I daresay Gao's name would scarcely have been mentioned. This was not because his legacy had been suppressed by Communist totalitarianism, but rather because his contribution to the Chinese literary scene was fairly short-lived and was later surpassed by other writers of avant-garde fiction and drama.

One rather awkward result of the 2000 Nobel Prize, then, was that a key asset of the cultural capital of Western literary discourse was finally bestowed upon China, but in a way that only reinforced the impression that the West neither knew exactly what was happening in contemporary Chinese literature nor particularly cared -- after all, Gao Xingjian himself had been living in Europe since the late 1980s. The geopolitical implications of such an imbalance in cultural globalization are obvious; most Chinese college graduates, for example, can easily name several modern American literary figures and works, which is just one example of the myriad ways in which Western cultural discourse permeates Chinese aesthetic and intellectual life.

The reverse, needless to say, is not true. Instead, the study of modern Chinese literature and culture is a relatively small and fairly isolated field within the Western academy. Its practitioners have long been well-versed in the latest Western theoretical trends, from New Criticism to New Historicism to the various forms of postcolonialism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and so on. Nevertheless, just as modern Chinese literature itself is largely invisible in the West, scholarship on Chinese

literature has rarely had any impact on Western theoretical discourse in general (except perhaps when Chinese literature was briefly used as a case study by Fredric Jameson, whose discussion of Lu Xun as an example of third-world literature as "national allegory" caused a stir in the 1980s). One of the scholars of Chinese culture who has been most vigilant in pointing out such disparities in discursive power, Rey Chow, has paradoxically become practically the only exception to the rule. Indeed, if Gao Xingjian is one of the few Chinese authors likely to be vaguely familiar to Western readers, Rey Chow is perhaps the only scholar of Chinese cultural studies likely to be familiar to cultural studies and comparative literature scholars in general.

In this context, several questions immediately arise concerning Rey Chow's edited volume, *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*. What is the role of "theory" in "modern Chinese literary and cultural studies," and what forms does this theory take? What relationship does (and should) the "reimagined field" of Chinese cultural studies have to Western theoretical discourse in general on the one hand, and to scholarly discourse within China on the other?

We can begin to answer the first question simply by cataloguing the theories deployed by the authors in Rey Chow's anthology. The most prominent names include Benedict Anderson, Etienne Balibar, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Raymond Williams, while briefer references are made to figures such as Althusser, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Guattari, Habermas, Kristeva, Lacan, McLuhan, Saussure, and Wallerstein -- in short, a line-up probably not much different from that of hundreds of volumes coming out of departments of English or Comparative literature over the last decade or so. This firmament is supplemented by several of the more prominent English-language scholars of Chinese culture (most notably Rey Chow herself, to whom many of the other contributors refer) as well as a smattering of scholars of South Asian or Japanese literature. Scholars actually based in mainland China or Taiwan generally appear only as objects of study, not as providers of theoretical resources themselves. Of the volume's thirteen contributors, two are based in Hong Kong, one in Australia, and the rest in the United States (though one has since moved to England).

As for the theoretical agenda of the contributors, the main approach that emerges can be broadly described as deconstructive. For example, David Der-wei Wang, one of the finest close readers of Chinese literature in the American academy, offers original and often exciting readings of "Three Hungry Women" -- characters from three disparate works of modern Chinese literature. Wang's essay first describes how the metaphor of hunger has functioned ideologically in mainstream Chinese leftist discourse, then

shows how his three examples, consciously or not, subvert, exceed, or finally show the exhaustion of that discourse.

While Wang's target is the Communist ideology that came to rule mainland China for much of the century and functioned as an underground oppositional ideology in Taiwan, most contributors aim their deconstructive impulses squarely at the notion of "Chineseness" itself -- as an ethnic, linguistic, and national identity. Thus Leung Ping-kwan uses stories set in Hong Kong by Huang Guliu and Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) to show how Chinese nationalism represents not an escape from British colonialism but rather another oppressive ideology that seeks to stamp out the hybridity inherent in Hong Kong's identity; Christopher Lupke reads Wang Wenxing's 1939 Taiwan novel, *Family Catastrophe*, as an example of "minor literature," an experimental "text that throws into question the whole project of Chinese modernity" (148) and teaches us that we should "bracket the oppressive image of a cohesive nation-state" of China (154); Kwai-Cheung Lo, loosely reversing the Derridean critique of phonocentrism, argues that in Hong Kong popular culture spoken Cantonese becomes a disruptive, anarchic force that can "subvert the system of subjectivization" embodied by Mandarin-based Chinese writing (196); and Ien Ang questions, from the vantage point of an "overseas Chinese" several generations removed from the Chinese land and language, whether the category "Chinese" ultimately signifies anything except the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of many in both China and the West.

Other essays in the volume further problematize the notion of Chineseness as constructed by Western discourse. Thus Dorothy Ko traces the way Western observers over the last half millennium have characterized Chinese fashion -- or the ostensible lack thereof -- and focuses particularly on the Western fascination with the practice of footbinding. Ko reveals how Western visitors to China had vastly different perceptions of Chinese people's appearance based on their own Orientalist assumptions -- whether attributing cultural sophistication and even an honorary "whiteness" to Chinese people in earlier periods of contact or later imagining the Chinese as a veiled, oppressed, tradition-bound Other during the height of Western imperialism. In another essay, Stanley K. Abe traces the history of Xu Bing's celebrated art installation, *A Book from the Sky*, from its first incarnation in China in 1988 through subsequent exhibitions in the West well into the 1990s. Abe examines how the reception and meaning of the piece inevitably changed significantly according to how and for what audience it was installed. In particular, the essential effect of the work -- consisting of massive scrolls filled with an ancient-looking script that turns out to be composed entirely of nonsensical Chinese characters -- fundamentally changes when the viewer is a foreigner for whom *all* Chinese characters are nonsensical. Consequently, while Chinese readers approaching the work find their own language made estranged and

illegible, a Western viewer is likely to have the Chinese character's "enduring effectiveness as a symbol of China" only reinforced by Xu Bing's installation (239).

If the majority of papers in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory* work to denaturalize "Chineseness," whether constructed from within or without, an essay on Chinese reportage literature by Charles A. Laughlin stands out as an exception. Laughlin argues that modern Chinese reportage literature counters the Western Enlightenment ideology of individualism, and thus the conventions of Western literary realism, by narrating from the point of view of a collective rather than an individual subject. This argument occasionally might even lend itself to stereotypes of a Confucian Chinese essence in which social relationships always trump the individual ego (though Laughlin himself clearly identifies collective narration as a modern leftist phenomenon); in any case, insofar as it emphasizes a distinctively Chinese difference, the argument appears as downright subversive in the context of the volume as a whole.

As an example of the misguided application of the standards of Enlightenment individualism to modern Chinese literature, Laughlin cites C. T. Hsia, the founding figure of modern Chinese literary studies in English. Given the current state of the field, this positioning against Hsia appears somewhat as a straw-man tactic; after all, as a practitioner of New Criticism and a political Cold Warrior, Hsia has functioned in the field mostly as an emblem of how-we-don't-do-things-anymore at least since the 1980s. Indeed, a "reimagining" of the field has long been deemed necessary in part because of the political origins of area studies in the United States as an academic arm of the struggle against global Communism after World War Two.

In her introduction, however, Chow makes clear that she thinks the problems of Chinese literary studies run deeper than simple Cold War politics. The real culprit, in her view, is the tradition of academic sinology, born of imperialism, in which Western scholars have long taken the liberty to "pose as the scientific investigators and moral custodians of another culture" (7). According to Chow, this tradition continues today, though there is "a sustained, conspicuous silence in the field of Chinese studies on what it means for certain white scholars to expound so freely on Chinese tradition, culture, language, history, women, and so forth in the postcolonial age" (7). What these scholars continue to produce, Chow argues, is precisely the fiction of "Chineseness," so that "an entire theory of ethnicity becomes embedded (without ever being articulated as such) in the putative claims about Chinese poetics and literary studies" (11).

Chow's focus on the American academy indicates that, in reevaluating "Chineseness," her immediate political intervention is precisely within the field of Chinese literary and cultural studies in the West rather than in China. Still, the critique may raise more questions than it answers about where exactly the fault lies within the Western academy. If the problem were "white scholars" in general, the argument would obviously founder on its own contradictions, as what began as a critique of essentializing notions of "Chineseness" would be making the same sort of generalizations it seeks to undermine. If the problem indeed comes only from "certain white scholars" rather than "Caucasian members" (8) of East Asian language and literature departments in general (Chow does call for the "problematizing of *whiteness*" [7], but her own rhetoric does little to denaturalize the notion of a "white" or "Caucasian" race) -- the questions remain how to distinguish legitimate scholarship from residually colonialist claptrap and who is empowered to make that distinction. Some might indeed accuse Chow of implicitly laying claim to some innate "Chineseness" that gives her the power to judge her "white" colleagues; however, to be fair, her critical stance has always been rooted more in a position of discursive marginality (as a "Chinese," a "woman," a native of Hong Kong, etc.) rather than in an essentialism involving any of those terms. Part of this marginality, in fact, is inherent in the field of Chinese cultural studies, which, as discussed earlier, is a mostly irrelevant player within theoretical debates in the humanities in general. Then again, as already mentioned, Rey Chow herself is the rare exception, so that by this point in her career she is, in this sense at least, far less discursively marginalized than are most of her colleagues from East Asian language and literature departments (whether of Chinese, European, or any other descent).

Chow's emphasis on "Chineseness" as a creation of Western scholarship entails a conspicuous silence about the extent to which scholars in the Western academy necessarily confront discursive formations of ethnicity and nationhood over which they have little control. Her introduction, for example, critiques the unquestioned hegemony of Mandarin as *the* standard Chinese in North American departments of East Asian languages and literatures, so that "Mandarin is, properly speaking, also *the white man's Chinese*" (8; emphasis in original). While the dominance of Mandarin in the Chinese language and literature curricula of Western universities is unquestionable, it is also true that Mandarin was declared the official national language by both the Republic of China (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), that some dialect of Mandarin is the native language of seventy percent of the Chinese population, and that, as the official language of government and school instruction, Mandarin is the only language spoken throughout mainland China. Thus, while Mandarin is clearly implicated in the formation of hegemonic notions of the Chinese nation and ethnicity, its dominance in North American academic programs

can hardly be called a cause of this hegemony rather than a result of Mandarin's long-standing official status within the Chinese state.

As this example shows, scholarship seeking to interrogate "Chineseness" as a discursive formation eventually must face a problem much larger than the lingering Orientalism of a marginalized sector of the Western academy; it must cope with the resurgent nationalism within the state of China itself (not to mention the distinct nationalism of the Taiwan independence movement). The question then becomes not simply whether Western scholars can legitimately speak of "Chineseness," but exactly *how* China as nation and ethnicity is actively imagined by political and cultural agents within China. In this context, the volume's essay by Chris Berry is especially productive. Berry's title asks in part "Can China Make Movies? Or Do Movies Make China?" and his goal is not to deconstruct the nation as a naturalized category and thus show "that 'China' is a nonexistent fiction," but rather to show that China, though not "singular, essential, and naturalized," is nonetheless "a discursively produced and socially and historically contingent collective entity" (160). Using Judith Butler's theory of the performative, Berry shows how national agency is less a fiction than a "contingent formation," each citation of which both reproduces the imagined unity that is "China" and also constitutes an intervention advancing a particular ideological vision of that unity. This approach is obviously more useful than simply calling ethnic and national identity a hallucination, as it allows us to cope with the power and importance of such an "imaginary" in cultural and political life.

A related question is how the field of Chinese literary and cultural studies in the Anglophone West, as "reimagined" in the "age of theory" in this volume, relates to Chinese literary and cultural studies in China itself. The issue is particularly thorny since one of Rey Chow's stated purposes is to "split" Chinese ethnicity, opposing "the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race'" with "a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery" (6). Thus the majority of the essays in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory* deal at least in part with authors and texts from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the Chinese diaspora and/or with how China is viewed from the West. This contrasts sharply with other recent anthologies on Chinese cultural studies published in America (for example, Dirlik and Zhang, Liu and Tang, Zhang), which largely take the PRC -- and, even more specifically, Beijing and (secondarily) Shanghai -- as the centers of Chinese cultural discourse and intellectual politics.

An even more pertinent point of comparison are the recent anthologies,*Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* and *One China, Many Paths*, which consist largely of essays by mainland Chinese scholars about recent intellectual debates in China. (After

drafting the current essay, I became aware of an in-depth review of *One China, Many Paths* by Arif Dirlik, who addresses many of the same issues I raise here, but with Chinese scholarship as the starting point.) Two points that these volumes make readily apparent are that (1) the "age of theory" is a very different thing in China than it is in the Western academy; and (2) in China itself, notions of "Chineseness" as nation and ethnicity, far from being objects of deconstruction, are on the contrary categories mostly taken for granted within critical projects that are very much concerned with the fate of the Chinese nation. The first point becomes apparent in the introduction to *Voicing Concerns*, in which editor Gloria Davies confronts the charge, made by unnamed Anglophone readers of the book manuscript, that many of the essays therein are not theoretically sophisticated but rather "simplistic and naïve" (13). As Davies makes clear, this judgment results in part from quite dissimilar ideas about the purpose of "theory" and of academic inquiry in general between China and the Anglophone West. While contemporary Western "theory" has proliferated in mainland Chinese scholarship for two decades now, the overall function of scholarship in China is still not felt to be "the kind of self-reflexive problematizing of language and thought characteristic of the speculative tradition in Western philosophy" (4); instead, "the moral purpose of Chinese critical thinking continues to be determined by nation-building and modernization priorities" (7). In the introduction to her own volume, Rey Chow remarks on "the mobilization of an unabashedly chauvinistic sinocentrism" among "the young generations of Chinese intellectuals in the People's Republic" (5), and this is indeed one form taken by the concern for the nation in contemporary PRC scholarship.

In Chow's anthology, Michelle Yeh's essay, "International Theory and the Transnational Critic: China in the Age of Multiculturalism," directly confronts and examines the difficult issues raised when the globalization of theory intersects with the intellectual politics of nationalism. She notes that when "Western theory" first proliferated among Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, it was considered a subversive discourse that implicitly countered the official Communist ideology with that of the "enlightened" West. In the 1990s, however, there was an unmistakable reversal: "Although the oppositional edge of theory remains, it is aimed not at the establishment in China but at the West" (258), so that "ironically, if nationalism is subject to constant critical scrutiny and deconstruction in contemporary theory in the West, the same theory seems to provide many Chinese intellectuals with a rationale for cultural nationalism" (260). The Chinese forms of postcolonial and poststructural criticism almost invariably are aimed at Western hegemony, not at the systems of ideological and material domination within China. (In fact, the intellectuals most critical of the status quo within China come from the "new left wing" [*xin zuopai*] and have a decidedly Marxist rather than deconstructionist bent.)

If the field of Chinese literary and cultural studies in the West seeks to "reimagine" itself in a way that problematizes the notions of the Chinese nation and ethnicity, how does it deal with the fact that its counterpart in China appears to be busy shoring up the very ideas we are deconstructing? Obviously the geopolitical disparities in discursive power mentioned at the beginning of this review make the situation even more problematic, as a Western-launched theoretical attack on "Chineseness" may well be seen in China as complicit with an overall Western agenda that includes the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the collision between a US spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet off the coast of China in 2001, and countless other incidents widely viewed in China as instances of American and Western attacks on Chinese sovereignty and national dignity. In short, an attack on "Chineseness" could be seen as an effort to "contain" China and stifle its rise to parity with the great powers of the West. Michelle Yeh implicitly recognizes this dilemma when she professes to be "well aware of the economic and material inequalities between those of us working in the United States and scholars working in mainland China, which renders the issue of power relations between China and the West even more sensitive." Nevertheless, she insists:

[C]ultural nationalism cannot be an effective critique of Orientalism because it replicates and perpetuates the latter epistemologically, and, in doing so, it falls short of fully deconstructing the Orientalism without and elides the Orientalism within. If Chinese cultural nationalism appears to be the antithesis of Orientalism, they are coterminous at a deeper level because both operate in a dualistic framework that reifies self and other, Chineseness and Westernness, and both oppress dissenting approaches. (270)

While I -- and most likely the vast majority of readers of Rey Chow's volume -- agree completely with this view, what strikes me is the extent to which this agreement comes from an assumption of scholarly distance, if not objectivity, that is precisely what scholars in China have long lacked the luxury of making. Just as C. T. Hsia, the founding figure of modern Chinese literary studies in the West mentioned earlier, strongly criticized the "obsession with China" that he thought kept most modern Chinese fiction writers from achieving artistic greatness, we might feel that the urgency that long forced Chinese scholars to confront dire national circumstances -- from foreign occupation to civil war to the Cultural Revolution in the PRC and martial law in the ROC -- has prevented them from achieving the scholarly independence necessary to achieve what the Western academy views as theoretical sophistication.

This problem continues to the present day even in Taiwan -- which, while it now enjoys political democracy and vigorous public debate, nonetheless is still in the midst of an ongoing identity crisis and is haunted by the explicit

threat of military invasion by the PRC. The effects of these conditions upon scholarship in Taiwan are among the many topics explored in an essay by Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang in Rey Chow's anthology. Though its immediate subject is the *kominka*, or Japanese-collaborationist, literature written in Taiwan during World War Two, this chapter, by North America's leading historiographer of Taiwan literature, in fact provides a wide-ranging and fascinating picture of discursive nation-building and its discontents in Taiwan over the past several decades. Chang shows, among other things, that the critical discourse in Taiwan on *kominka* literature has been driven not by the concern for scholarly truth but rather by the identity politics of the postwar period, leading to "shallowness" and "lack of sophistication" in the scholarship (104). Specifically, it has been caught up in "the search for an axis along which the Taiwanese literary tradition has supposedly evolved" (102). Here again, discursive nation-building distorts the critical capacities of scholarship, except that among many scholars and critics in Taiwan the "nation" that must be laboriously erected is a Taiwan separate from its mainland Chinese origins, such that a literary tradition must be constructed as distinctively Taiwanese even if its medium is the Chinese written language (or, in the case of *kominka* literature, even the Japanese language).

Chang's essay, like Chris Berry's discussion of "national agency" in Chinese cinema, effectively provides a case study in the nitty-gritty of the textual construction of the nation while assuming that the role of professional scholarship is to stand outside that process and maintain the ability to critically assess, describe, and even resist it. From such a vantage point, Chang's conclusion convincingly reinforces the deconstructive theme of the anthology as a whole, asserting that

one distinctive value of studying Taiwanese literature is precisely this: its inherent hybridity and conspicuous deviation from the norm of a national literature force us to recognize the futility of attempts to contain the complexly interactive nature of any literary tradition, cultural heritage, or personal life within a teleologically conceived narrative. (120)

If this perspective appears to be most easily accessible in the North American academy during the "age of theory," it is also becoming increasingly feasible in Taiwan and even mainland China. At such an historical juncture, however, it is perhaps worth considering the possible price of this desirable theoretical distance. In the PRC, the prominence of literature and of intellectual discourse declined precipitously in the course of the 1990s, when market-driven popular culture proliferated and the role of serious artists and intellectuals in public life plummeted. Many Chinese scholars lamented the "vulgarization" of Chinese culture, while some popular writers and self-described postmodernist critics sneered that intellectuals were only lamenting their own loss of cultural capital and

sense of self-importance as the moral shepherds of the nation. As the decade progressed, however, even a few of the scholars who had critiqued the decline of serious literature and intellectual life began to grudgingly appreciate the professional space that comes with the segregation of scholarship from the rest of society. They noted, for example, that China had long lacked an "independent academic tradition of academics for academics' sake, pursuit of knowledge for its own sake," and hoped that their very marginalization was finally giving them an independent space, even as they acknowledged the irony that the very force that had led to the decline of the intellectual in public life -- the increasing role of the market in the cultural sphere -- had itself been strongly supported by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s (Wang Xiaoming 50).

Perhaps there is the rub. The scholarly distance and theoretical "sophistication" necessary to discursively deconstruct the unities of nation and ethnicity may come only when the differentiation of society under capitalist modernity is advanced enough to grant scholarship sufficient autonomy to carry out this labor -- an autonomy that itself only comes with enough marginalization to make its critique largely irrelevant to the very social forms it deconstructs.

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